Corps teams with federal agencies, states and tribes to determine Libby Dam flows

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SEATTLE - Technical and biological experts from the Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the states of Montana and Idaho, the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe and other federal agencies are working collaboratively to develop a flow plan implementation protocol to guide flows from Libby Dam during the spring and early summer for the next 10 years, as required by the 2006 FWS Biological Opinion.

On Feb. 18, 2006, FWS issued its biological opinion, referred to as a BiOp, regarding the effects of operations of Libby Dam on endangered Kootenai River white sturgeon and threatened bull trout. The BiOp requires the Corps and BPA to implement actions that will avoid jeopardizing sturgeon and adversely modifying critical habitat, and avoid jeopardizing bull trout. FWS has posted its BiOp at www.fws.gov/easternwashington under Of Special Interest: February 18, 2006 Biological Opinion regarding the operation of Libby Dam."

The BiOp is adaptive and performance-driven. Instead of prescribing actions, the FWS asks the Corps and BPA to provide habitat attributes needed for successful sturgeon spawning, and egg and larvae survival. Under this approach, the Corps and BPA have the flexibility to select how they will achieve sturgeon habitat requirements, such as velocity, turbidity, temperature and depth.

The flow plan protocol, targeted for completion by April 14, 2006, will guide an integrated and adaptive flow strategy for the Kootenai River. This flow plan strategy will assess the biological effects of flows for sturgeon and other species, and it will allow for scientifically informed decisions regarding future flow releases and structural modifications at Libby Dam.

The BiOp recommends the Corps provide flows exceeding the 25,000 cfs powerhouse capacity by up to 10,000 cfs, for a maximum of 35,000 cfs when water supply conditions are suitable. The BiOp calls for these flows in three of the next ten years, or more preferably three of the next four years if reservoir elevations, inflow, reservoir water temperatures, and other conditions allow. The intent is to mimic as closely as possible the timing, temperature, and shape the river flows would have had before Libby Dam was built, as defined in the Corps' "Kootenai River Ecosystem Function Restoration Flow Plan," dated May 5, 2005.

The Corps will use the completed flow plan protocol to determine whether Canadian Rocky snow pack, downstream tributary inflows, and Lake Koocanusa elevation will allow for additional releases from Libby of up to 35,000 cfs. As more is learned, the protocol will be updated to help the Corps determine the appropriate flow scenario for each of the next 10 years. It is possible that the Corps will spill water from Libby Dam beginning as early as late May of 2006. Residents could expect to see the moderate freshets they've seen for the last several years within current flood stage in non-flood management conditions. A shaped flow with spill would consist of up to 14 days of higher flow, not all of which are necessarily spill, and 21 days of gradually receding flow below powerhouse capacity. The higher flows would be completed by the end of June, and would not voluntarily exceed 35,000 cfs.

In the long term, river channel deepening may be the best way to achieve greater depths in the reach of the Kootenai River at and upstream of Bonners Ferry, where biologists believe sturgeon can successfully reproduce if critical habitat attributes are provided. But providing additional flow from Libby Dam is the only tool currently available to assess the effects of additional depth on sturgeon spawning and migration, and its the only tool that will allow a complete assessment of sturgeon response to these depths while enough adult fish remain in the river to spawn. The species are declining at a rate of 9 percent per year, and the current wild stock of approximately 500 adults will soon be extinct without immediate action.

State, federal and tribal entities also plan to construct the first of their habitat improvement measures in the summer of 2006 at Shorty's Island, downstream from Bonners Ferry. This pilot project will test whether placement of rock in the Kootenai River will withstand bedload movement and not be covered by fine sediments. It also will test whether the rock will remain stable or sink under the riverbed.

The final Upper Columbia River Alternative Flood Control and Fish Operations (VARQ) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is scheduled for completion before the voluntary release of any additional flows over powerhouse capacity at Libby Dam. The final EIS, scheduled for completion in May 2006, will address the effects of spill-caused elevated total dissolved gas in the river to fish below the dam.

Concurrently with development of the flow plan protocol, the Corps and BPA are following the procedures of the Columbia River Treaty and coordinating with BC Hydro to address concerns the Canadians may have regarding this proposed change to Libby Dam operations.

The Corps will soon announce public meetings to be held in Libby and Bonners Ferry to answer questions regarding the BiOp implementation plan protocol.